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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTER LAVROV PROMISES  
TURKMENISTAN EDUCATION AND HEALTH ASSISTANCE

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Summary

1. (SBU) During an April 5 meeting in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov and Russia, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov expanded the traditional Russian-Turkmenistani state dialog, touching on economic cooperation, but focusing a majority of the time on "humanitarian," i.e., education cultural and social issues. Some token discussions on energy issues and regional politics were broached in regard to actively developing economic relations, Caspian Sea delimitation and "common approaches" regarding diplomatic and peaceful resolutions on Afghanistan and Iran, but cultural development took center stage in the media and during the Charge's private meeting with Russian Ambassador to Turkmenistan Igor Blatov on April 11. Blatov confirmed that Russia saw a new opportunity with the Berdimuhammedov administration to develop education and cultural cooperation, Russian-language resources, including news outlets, and region-to-region cooperation between the two countries. End Summary.

The Lavrov Meeting - Economic Cooperation  
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2. (SBU) Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov met with Russia, Foreign Minister Sergey

Lavrov, Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Commonwealth of Independent States Department Head Peshkov. The Russian Foreign Minister also met separately with his Turkmenistani counterpart, Rashit Meredov, and signed a "Program of Cooperation" between the two foreign policy agencies.

¶3. (U) In his lobby statements following the two meetings, Lavrov highlighted economic cooperation:

- Lavrov noted that the two countries would deepen and expand trade and economic cooperation and investments. He said they discussed increasing opportunities for revitalizing the work of the intergovernmental trade-economic cooperation commission, which was discontinued four years ago. The commission is tasked with facilitating cooperation and contacts between Russian and Turkmenistani companies. (Note: Russian Foreign Minister Fradkov first raised this issue during his February 15 meeting with President Berdimuhammedov. End note.)

- Caspian Sea legal status: Both sides agreed to prepare documents on the Caspian Sea status, and the Russian MFA's press release on the same day noted that the two leaders discussed the prospect of convening a second Caspian Sea summit.

- Lavrov mentioned the two countries, "common approach" in working within international organizations, such as the UN and OSCE, as well as their "very close approaches" to the situation in Afghanistan and the Iranian nuclear program. Both countries believe these issues need to be resolved through diplomatic and peaceful means.

"Humanitarian" (Education and Culture) Cooperation  
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¶4. (U) During an airport interview with Turkmenistani TV

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before his departure, Lavrov noted the development of cooperation in education and culture. During his state visit, Lavrov went to the Russian-Turkmenistani school and the Russian Theater, both named after Pushkin. Both countries agreed that the school would be expanded by adding a building. The government-owned daily newspaper &Neutral Turkmenistan& carried an April 11 tender announcement by Gazprom's Ashgabat office for the construction of the school building and a kindergarten. Lavrov said that cultural and arts exchanges would be continued, and stressed the importance of exchanges between Russia's regions -- specifically Sverdlovsk, Astrakhan and St. Petersburg -- and Turkmenistan.

Russian Ambassador Touts Lavrov's Successes  
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¶5. (SBU) Russian Ambassador Igor Blatov described Lavrov's meetings with President Berdimuhammedov and Foreign Minister Meredov as "very successful," during an April 11 meeting with Charge. He added the following first-hand details about the Lavrov meetings:

- De-emphasis on gas: Lavrov did not need to raise the subject again, since Prime Minister Fradkov had received adequate assurances from Berdimuhammedov during their February 15 meeting that the Government of Turkmenistan would honor existing gas contracts. Blatov noted that, "No mature relationship can be based just on gas," (Comment: Though Blatov failed to see the humor in the statement. End Comment.).

- Political cooperation: The Russian side expressed its desire for more consultation on international relations, including Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, the Caspian Sea, UN and OSCE.

- Russian language: Lavrov encouraged preservation of the Russian language through additional Russian-language courses in schools and increased access to Russian-language news sources and professional journals. Berdimuhammedov agreed to re-establish the Russian-language Radio Mayak. (Comment: The station was closed in June 2004, ostensibly for repairs according to the Government of Turkmenistan, according to Blatov it was closed after airing a broadcast with a negative comment about about Turkmenistan,s policies. End Comment.)

- Education: Berdimuhammedov agreed to Lavrov,s initiative to open a "Russian-Turkmen University," that would specialize in technical training, in particular in the oil and gas spheres.

- Human rights: No human rights issues were raised by Lavrov during the meetings, including the status of the Russian minority, and Blatov urged the United States to take a gradual approach in pressing the new government for reforms. Blatov argued that as increasingly more Turkmenistanis travel and study abroad and have access to information, "these things will take care of themselves."

- State Visit: Lavrov invited Berdimuhammedov to a state visit to Moscow, which Blatov thought could occur as early as the first week of May.

Astrakhan Governor's Visit

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16. (SBU) Blatov also spoke enthusiastically about the outcome of the Astrakhan governor,s April 10-11 visit. The delegation met with President Berdimuhammedov and held talks with several government agencies.

- Medical exchanges: Astrakhan offered to host Turkmenistani specialists at its medical institutes and to send Astrakhan's specialists to Turkmenistan to train local specialists.

- Education: Astrakhan will set a generous quota for Turkmenistani students to study at Astrakhan,s institutions of higher education and vocational schools.

- Shipbuilding: Astrakhan agreed to supply Turkmenistan with six new ships - five fishing vessels and one research vessel.

- Transportation: The two sides agreed to open a ferry line between Turkmenbasy and Astrakhan for passengers, vehicles and cargo. They also agreed to establish a Turkmenistan Airlines and possibly a Russian airline flight between either Ashgabat or Turkmenbasy, via Aktau in Kazakhstan, to Astrakhan.

Comment

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17. (SBU) Through de-emphasizing gas cooperation and emphasizing a kaleidoscope of new areas for cooperation, Russia appears to be remaking its image of a powerful state taking advantage of its smaller neighbor,s resources. Following Niyazov,s death, many press articles portrayed Russia as the neighborhood bully and this visit somewhat mollifies that criticism. Russia may feel it is losing ground in Turkmenistan, because Berdimuhammedov has elected to talk with a variety of private sector and diplomatic players about the possibilities for alternative and additional gas pipelines exciting Turkmenistan. Expanding cooperation in the economic and humanitarian spheres is intended to re-introduce Russia as an equal partner who is genuinely interested in Turkmenistan,s development. On level ground, it is also possible to build a foundation for future cooperation in other, more sensitive areas, such as the military.

18. (SBU) Russia's attempt at "soft diplomacy," never its strong point, is significant. A Danish diplomat resident in Moscow told Charge on April 12, that the Russian Government's forays into education, culture and health assistance was "new." He considered the development positive in that Turkmenistan had the need for this assistance and Moscow had the means. According to this source, Moscow is the "New York City" of Central Asia, the great white way of knowledge and culture.

19. (SBU) On the eve of the USG education delegation's visit to Turkmenistan, embassy recommends a meeting with the Russian Embassy both to further learn of Russian "humanitarian" plans in Turkmenistan and also to explore possible joint programs. Long-time resident Turkmenistan observers, including the local EU-TACIS representative, believe this new Russian initiative is a reflection of Russia's acknowledgement that it missed the hearts and minds boat in Turkmenistan, and that its influence here could wane

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if policy remained based on the mercantalist policy of relying on gas imports as the basis for a bilateral relationship.

End Comment.  
BRUSH